



UNDERSTANDING ELECTIONS & CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR VOTE

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Transcript

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Hello, my name is Thierry Uwamahoro and this is *Getting the Most from Your Vote*.

In today's lesson, you will gain a greater understanding of voter rights and responsibilities, the benefits of active political engagement, how to make informed voting choices, and the necessity to maintain personal integrity as a voter.

The right to vote is inseparable from the right to participate in public life. Through voting, you can choose the candidate who will work on the issues you care most about. Voting helps steer policies that affect both the future direction of your country and your daily life. For example, if youth unemployment is an issue that is important to you, you would want to vote for a candidate who has the best plan to create jobs or fund training programs aimed at youth.

During an electoral period, you have a certain set of rights and responsibilities that are true for all free and fair elections. First, you have the right to support or campaign on behalf of any candidate. Second, to vote freely for any candidate or measure of your choosing, and third, to have your vote kept confidential.

As a citizen in a democracy, you also have the responsibility to be informed. So take time to educate yourself before you go to the polls. Learn how to register to vote, and make sure you register before the deadline. Know the date of the election. Know your assigned polling station. Know the required documentation you need to bring to your polling station. And know the candidates and issues. Inform yourself by watching candidate debates, attending political events, and following news about the issues and candidates in the local newspaper, radio or television.

Elections can be an important entry point to allow you and your fellow citizens to influence politics in your country. Improvements in the quality of your life can happen when you are able to exercise sufficient power to influence your government.

Voting is important, but Election Day is only one day. The periods before and after an election are also opportunities for you to advocate for issues that you care about. Before an election, candidates looking to attract votes are often willing to learn more about issues





of importance to their constituents. During this period, ask candidates to make a promise, known as a campaign pledge, to pursue a certain policy when they get elected. After an election, hold your representatives accountable for following through on these promises. For example, let's say that during a campaign, a candidate promised to reduce youth unemployment. After they are elected, you can form an advocacy group to remind them of this promise. Your advocacy group can pressure elected officials to create and pass laws that would help more young people find jobs. Your group can also track how the government spends public funds to make sure they are being used for their intended purposes, such as youth skills-building programs. These activities help fight corruption in public spending. They also remind elected officials to pay attention to their constituents' concerns throughout the whole electoral cycle.

So how can a voter make informed choices about candidates and issues to support? You cannot truly express your political voice unless you are first informed about your voting choices. In deciding how to vote, you should focus on the candidate's ideas for the future. Look beyond the personalities of the candidates or who might share your religion, gender, ethnicity or place of origin.

Organizing and attending candidate debates is one way voters can get information on candidates' policies before casting their ballots.

As a voter, focus on the issues. Issue-based voter education assists voters in making decisions based on a specific problem. That helps to ensure that voters focus on how the candidate plans to solve a problem, not their overall ideology. Make sure candidates are aware of your main concerns and why an issue is relevant to your life. Know what matters to you, whether it's health care, education or unemployment. Focusing on issues helps you understand how voting for a certain candidate, party or policy can lead to change you want to see.

You have a vested interest in election outcomes and you can mobilize your fellow citizens. Encourage them to register to vote. Challenge them to vote based on substantive issues. And inspire their sustained engagement in the political process beyond Election Day.

Your vote is your voice. If you sell your vote, then you are essentially selling your future.

Buying and selling votes leads to reduced government accountability, decreases trust in politics, and increases corruption. Work with members of your community to inform your fellow citizens of the importance of refusing to let anyone buy their vote. Use media, public events and voter-education campaigns. You can also ask candidates and parties to make public commitments to fight corruption and vote buying during the election.

If people don't have faith that an election will be free and fair, they may choose not to participate. But if they understand how their participation strengthens their influence on issues they care about, they will be more inclined to cast their vote and stay politically engaged.





Your political power lies in your vote. You can use it to make a difference in your life and the lives of your friends, family and the future of your country. Vote the change you want to see and stay engaged to ensure your voice continues to be heard long after Election Day.

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